

Xavier Labelle

Victim Impact Statement - Tanya and Paul LaBelle

Paul: This was a senseless tragedy, and to even try to convey, even a fraction of the impact that this has had in a Victim Impact Statement, is impossible. Words both written and spoken can never convey the impact that the tragic crash on April 6, 2018 had on our son Xavier and our family. The reflection on how this has impacted us required us to go backwards on a journey of healing to the darkest days, weeks and months of our lives. This in itself is an extremely painful process. Perhaps describing the images and moments that continue to play through our minds is a starting point.

Tanya: The images of the scene of devastation continually pass through our minds as vividly as if it was yesterday. The heart-wrenching panicked phone call from our older son, Isaac, telling us that the Bronco bus was in an accident. A few minutes later, just after 6 pm, we arrived at the dread-filled scene. Watching Paul run down the highway. The faces. The voices. The sounds. The vehicles. Ambulances. Helicopters. The panic. The agony. The horror. And then running down the highway holding the hand of our 9 year old daughter, Viviana, desperate to find our son; her brother.

Paul: As an emergency room physician and STARS transport physician, I immediately grabbed my medical bag from the vehicle that I had with me, and ran towards the devastating scene. As I ran I called STARS link center who assured me both the Regina and Saskatoon STARS AMC and physicians were en route. Nothing can prepare a parent for the heart wrenching carnage that was before me. I was standing between the front of the overturned Semi and the remains of the bus. An RCMP officer stopped me and seeing my distress he talked me out of entering the scene further to help but rather to go be with Tanya and Viviana. He stressed we needed to be together at this time.

Tanya: We were told that there were no survivors left on the scene and directed to a church in Nipawin to wait for news. Other parents were there as well, some having already been turned away from the hospital. Periodically parents were called and then left to be with their son at the hospital. The agony of waiting, and praying, in the midst of so many people, feeling sick, worried, panicked, not getting called to go to the hospital, and then hours later, hearing that our son did not make it to the hospital. The faces of the other families present receiving that same news, is emblazoned in our minds.

Paul: We were told to go home and wait for the coroner to contact us. The drive back to Saskatoon over the midnight hours, was excruciating. We were horrified, after being told our son had not made it to the hospital, that he was laying dead in the cold field. We were told that they would move the bodies to Saskatoon as soon as they could.

After a long difficult drive back to Saskatoon we talked to the RUH Physician staff to see if there had been an error and that perhaps somehow Xavier had made it there. We learned there was one unidentified player, who had brown eyes, so this was not Xavier. Again, we were devastated.

Tanya: After a sleepless night, we and the other families of the deceased met with the

coroner and RCMP at the funeral home at 1 pm. We were accompanied by 5 of our family members. We were the last of the families present to be taken to identify our son. This situation has affected us all and shook us to the core. Once we were called for our turn around 3:30 pm, our son/brother/nephew/grandson was unrecognizable to us. We immediately stated that it was not Xavier. The staff was apologetic and took us to a room where we waited a few minutes to be shown another boy, which again, we knew right away that he was not our son.

Paul: Now we were very anxious and confused as maybe Xavier was still trapped at the scene or perhaps had wandered off into the fields unnoticed. We were assured the 29 people on the bus were all accounted for. Filled with restrained hope, around 4:00, we rushed to the RUH hospital and spoke to the staff caring for the injured. We showed them pictures and described our son hoping he was there. The staff members were sympathetic, but let us know that all of the players were identified and that our son was not there. We were confused and filled with anguish, not sure what to do.

Tanya: I asked, "Then where is our son?" We made another desperate panicked plea for an additional search of the crash site in case he was left in the field. I felt horrified at the thought of Xavier being out in that cold field still, and asked if they had police dogs out there to make sure that everyone was accounted for, and was assured that there was no one remaining on the scene. Xavier was the only one left to be identified.

Paul: We began to think that if he wasn't at the hospital, maybe in our grief, and due to the injuries, perhaps we were blinded by grief and were only hoping our son wasn't in the morgue. In our grief stricken state, we returned to the funeral home around 5:30 pm. We spent a long time with who we now began to believe must be the body of our son. We tried to find scars and birth marks that might help us. We could not find them. We noted discrepancies, but there were explanations given for the uncertainties. We looked up the contact information for Xavier's orthodontist and gave it to the authorities asking for dental records to be reviewed. This was agreed to, although we were told that it would delay things. We needed to be 100% sure and said that it would be OK for his autopsy to be performed last if necessary.

Tanya: We were slowly accepting that this might be our son and we grieved deeply over this boy. Painfully. Horrifically. Holding him. Weeping. Nose bleeding. Bawling.

We returned home from the morgue after 7:30 pm. Our families and friends gathered amidst the chaos and turmoil of the senseless tragedy. We didn't sleep. We didn't know what to do. People were coming from afar for a funeral. Unfathomable tragedy. Chaos in our home. Chaos in our hearts.

Paul: We started the unimaginable task of planning a funeral for one of our children. A task 14 other families had also begun and sadly a task 2 more families would also begin in the next couple of days. Those that had passed away and their families were not strangers to us. We were already a family bonded by our loved ones that were the Broncos. I had gotten to know Darcy and Dayna quite well as team physician for the

2016-17 year. We visited frequently during the intermission or post game consults. Over this past year I had many opportunities to visit with Mark and Chris. They were not only very good in their roles with the Broncos, but as we all know now, such incredible people. I remained on speed dial with Dayna, over the past season, as I was often at the rink, and still met and cared for many of the players whom we have grown to know and love.

Tanya: Xavier's billet brothers, Logan and Adam both passed away in the crash. Xavier and Logan had become good friends and brothers over the year. In the short time Adam was with them, he became a good friend and brother as well. This was the second year that Xavier was billeted with the Cannon family, and we know that they love and care deeply about their billet sons. Xavier grieves deeply for his fallen brothers, and teammates, and the Broncos staff that passed away.

Paul: During the hockey season, several of the players had stayed with us in Saskatoon while they wrote the SAT exam, had day surgery, or while travelling to and from their out of province homes. If there had only been one casualty in this crash we would have been devastated. But for 16, including who we believed to be our son, the grief was, and continues to be unimaginable. We along with many of the Bronco families attended the emotional Vigil in Humboldt. The outpouring of support and grief from Humboldt, Saskatchewan, Canada and the world had begun. In sharing in our pain, there was some comfort.

Tanya: It was shortly after the Vigil ended that we received the call that everyone now no longer expected, but had so desperately wanted to receive... our son Xavier was alive! Miraculously he had survived the crash!

Paul: We quietly left the vigil and in a discrete way outside, let our 15 family members with us, know our news, then rushed to the ICU in Saskatoon. We will never forget the trip back to Saskatoon as we hurried to Xavier's bedside. Understandably joy sprang out of our grief in an exponential way. We were told that he had many injuries, and a surgery. As we suddenly began this new journey, we worried how Xavier would be, given his injuries had prevented him from being identified for the first couple of days. We arrived to his beside with kisses and very, very gentle hugs filled with indescribable joy and relief.

Tanya: Yes, there was unspeakable joy, and yet our grief also continued. We met with the beautiful family that had been keeping vigil by Xavier's side, comforting and holding his hand until we arrived. We know they cared for him as a son, and we are forever grateful. We grieved with them as they came to terms with the realization that their amazing son had not survived the crash. He too had stayed at our home one occasion during the season, and we were struck by his maturity and grace. An incredible young man. We are devastated for them and their family.

Paul: Xavier's journey from ICU, to observation, Neurosurgical ward, the rehab unit at Saskatoon City Hospital and eventually home took 62 days. This was a roller coaster ride

with many high and lows. Listening to your son scream in confused agony, on and off, for the first two weeks, was excruciating. He was heavily sedated, and from the head injury, amnesic to much of the first two weeks.

Perhaps the easiest way to portray the impact physically on Xavier is to list the many injuries he has had to overcome.

Fractured skull/Traumatic Brain Injury including:

Post traumatic amnesia for approximately 2 weeks. Right subdural hematoma. Right frontal lobe, left frontal lobe, and right temporal lobe contusions Diffuse axonal injury

Facial fractures

Non-displaced sinus and orbital fractures

Lacerations:

20 cm complex facial laceration from hairline, down middle of forehead across nasal bridge and left eyelid. Deep lacerations right occipital scalp/back of his head.

Scarring on face, neck, head, arms, and back as a result of trauma.

Cervical spine ligaments partial tears and sprains.

Right hemopneumothorax/punctured lung requiring chest tube

Bilateral severe pulmonary contusions

Fractured right ribs

Lacerated liver

Lacerated right kidney

Left scapula fracture

Right sternoclavicular sprain

Spine fractures

Xavier had 16 fractures to his Spine

C6 Cortical fracture C7 Spinous Process Fracture

Non-displaced fractures Right transverse processes (L1 to L4)

Vertebral spinous fractures (T12 to L3)

Compression fractures of spine (T4, T5, T6)

He sustained an unstable comminuted L5 burst fracture, which was fortunately below where the spinal cord ends, but this injury damaged the nerves to his legs. This unstable fracture required surgical stabilization with fusion from L4-S1.

He also fractured his Right and Left sacrum.

Left Arm Nerve Damage

Left Brachial Plexus injury with no function to left axillary nerve. Atrophy of left shoulder muscles/deltoid, teres minor, affecting range of motion, strength and mobility.

Right and Left Leg Nerve Damage

L5 nerve damage resulting in weakness to both hips and lower legs affecting gait. Right side worse than left. This contributed to the long hospitalization as it took time to regain enough strength to start walking again. These continue to heal and will take up to 1-2 years before we know the permanence of the damage.

Facial Nerve Damage associated with forehead laceration.

Soft tissue crush injury to right arm and many other lacerations arms and body.

Post-traumatic stress and grief

Initially intubation was required as a result of the poly trauma and concerns around his breathing. He had surgery on Sunday morning to stabilize his spine. It was following the removal of his breathing tube Sunday evening that he declared who he was. Xavier was on a variety of medications, and required numerous medical procedures and treatments during his stay. Xavier was hospitalized for 62 days.

Tanya: Xavier continues to require medical care. Nerve conduction studies are being done every three months to monitor damaged arm and leg nerves. In October it was determined that the left shoulder nerve was not going to heal. A surgery was recommended in Calgary that offered only a 66% success rate. We planned to go ahead with this surgery, however, we used our personal funds to pay for, and travel for a second opinion and assessment on the shoulder nerve at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, MN. We were presented with an option that had the potential for a better outcome, and for which we had not been offered at the assessments in Canada. Due to the time sensitivity of nerve injuries, and the fact that the window was closing on this option, the nerve surgery was offered to Xavier the next day. We contacted SGI and Sask Health for funding for what seemed to offer Xavier a better outcome. After trying to meet the requirements for out of country medical care, we were denied. This was a frustrating scenario that created turmoil, conflict, and much second guessing on many levels.

Paul: On December 19, 2018, Xavier went ahead with the nerve transfer surgery in Calgary to try to improve function of his left shoulder. This, 3 hour surgery, required a 25 cm incision and immobilization in a sling for 4 weeks. The results of potential improvement will not be known for 6 to 12 months. He is continuing with physio as an outpatient. This will continue for the foreseeable future.

Tanya: In late October, at a follow-up appointment, we learned that the titanium screws had broken, and the spinal fusion of L4 to S1 had failed. We are shocked and worried about the long term consequences of this complication. I worry about the future pain that this could mean and if it will affect his mobility. Ongoing spine, neurology and surgical consultation to evaluate this failed spine fusion and broken titanium hardware is required. January 28 and 29 were spent investigating this further at the Mayo Clinic at our expense.

Paul: Xavier continues to face daily challenges associated with the injuries inflicted on April 6. He has many appointments with medical specialists as a result of his injuries and will have neuropsych testing this upcoming April in follow up to the Brain Injury.

Tanya: During the initial weeks and months, while coming to terms with Xavier's injuries and his ongoing needs, our levels of anxiety were extremely high. Sleep did not come often. We were still trying to come to terms with the loss of so many of the Broncos team and staff. Sadness tears and grief over the loss of so many loved ones, were intermingled with moments of joy, as Xavier made slow progress towards regaining independence. Trying to balance helping and encouraging Xavier in the hospital, and then subsequently at home, along with meeting the needs of our family, and others, and basic needs, was challenging, and felt impossible at times. We continue to feel emotional

about it all, and still feel like we are living in chaos and turmoil. I am struggling with navigating public situations, social interactions, and I am never really sure what to say to anyone. Repercussions from the tragedy have been exhausting and complicated for us. Conversation often returns to the tragic crash and the tears come easily.

Paul: Starting in July I returned to work as an ER physician. This was very challenging for me given the traumatic event that had impacted me so profoundly, also affecting those that I work with day to day. Tanya and I continue to take time off to accompany Xavier to his appointments in Saskatoon, and elsewhere. Being self-employed, this has also challenged us financially. We have struggled with the magnitude of the emotions that resulted from the initial chaos and ongoing suffering experienced by Xavier.

Xavier was named after his great grandfather and St. Francis Xavier. His name means 'bright' a name which he truly is growing into. He is such an amazing young man, who was a skilled and passionate hockey player, but so much more. He is exceptionally smart, creative, musical, and athletic. His bright blue eyes are often filled with a mischievous twinkle, and his beautiful smile and laugh are unforgettable. He is fiercely loyal and protective. He is an amazing son, brother, grandson, nephew, cousin and friend.

Tanya: As a young man Xavier has shown unbelievable courage over the last 9 months as he comes to terms with his injuries and the terrible loss of so many teammates, friends and mentors. We are proud of Xavier as he successfully struggled through so many challenges and is now emerging into a bright hopeful future. He truly is a man of great character showing perseverance, determination, optimism, compassion, and the will and desire to not let this define him as he moves forward. He remains mindful of those who did not survive grieving their loss in his way, and trying to honor them.

Xavier's injuries have affected him physically, mentally and emotionally. His goal and dream to play a higher level of hockey through a hockey scholarship was suddenly and brutally taken away from him, in the most horrific circumstances. We are grateful to those reaching out to help Xavier adjust to the many changes he is facing.

Paul: Isaac, our older son, has been deeply affected by the tragedy on April 6 as well. We worry about him even though he has shown remarkable maturity and poise throughout this difficult journey. Isaac was also a Humboldt Bronco at the beginning of the hockey season and got to know the Broncos until he was traded in October. Despite dealing with the chaos and emotion surrounding the crash, and the loss of his former teammates, Isaac through the strength of his amazing character, has been a steadfast support for Xavier, and all of us, showing kindness, love and patience to those suffering around him. Following the crash, he has made a special effort, in many ways, to honour those that have been affected.

Tanya: As parents, we continue to struggle with navigating these unprecedented unexpected times that were dramatic and often public. There is physical, emotional, financial and mental stress and anxiety associated with Xavier's injuries and associated health care decisions that have potential long term implications.

We worry about the emotional impact of this crash on each of our children. The sorrow felt as a parent to hear your child sobbing, and know that there is nothing you can do to make it right. We as parents, have struggled with feelings of sadness, helplessness, anger, frustration, sorrow, despair, feelings of inadequacy, and of being a failure, angst, fear, and exhaustion. The strain on our relationship, and those around us has been significant, as we attempt to communicate and heal during significant ongoing stressors. We have received counselling to sort through the turmoil this has caused to us and our family. We continue to feel like we are in the midst of chaos.

We grieve with the families that lost loved ones. We consider each person that was on that bus, their senseless death, and the families and loved ones left behind; the parents, grandparents, siblings, cousins, aunts and uncles, friends, girlfriends, partners, wives and children. We consider the heartache of birthdays, weddings, births, funerals, Christmas, celebrations, school days, weekends, mornings, afternoon and nights.

We consider those that were injured on the bus and the lives that are forever changed. Their direction has been altered in ways that are unfathomable, and in ways that are indescribable. We also consider those that were not on the bus, but whose lives have forever changed.

Paul: Perhaps the magnitude of the impact on Xavier, our family, and our Bronco family as a whole, is best reflected by the unprecedented, immeasurable outpouring of love and support that we received following this tragedy. The written and spoken words, prayers, acts of kindness, hugs, tears, and support shown towards us from family, friends, our Broncos families, coworkers, neighbors, faith communities, our large extended hockey family, strangers, religious and political leaders, health care providers, musicians, and hockey legends has been unbelievable.

Truly in the face of great tragedy the compassion, kindness and love of others has prevailed. We cannot adequately thank all those that have reached out to ease our families pain and suffering. We want each and every one to know that your efforts were greatly appreciated and that day by day, with your help, we are getting stronger.

In conclusion, we would like to read an adapted version of the lyrics from the song *Empty Chairs and Empty Tables* from the Les Miserables musical.

There's a grief that can't be spoken,
There's a pain goes on and on.
Empty lockers and empty benches,
Now my friends are dead and gone.
Here they talked of championships,
Here it was they prepped for games,
Here they talked about tomorrow and tomorrow never came.
From the table in the corner,
They could see a victory born,
And they rose with voices ringing,
And I can hear them now
The very words that they have spoken
Became their last communion
On this lonely intersection, at dusk.
Oh my friends, my friends forgive me
That I live and you are gone
There's a grief that can't be spoken,
And there's a pain goes on and on
Phantom faces at the glass,
Phantom shadows on the ice,
Empty lockers at empty benches where my friends will meet no more.
Oh my friends, my friends don't ask me
What your sacrifice was for
Empty lockers and empty benches
Where my friends will be no more.

Words Adapted from original Songwriters: Alain Albert Boublil / Claude Michel Schonberg / Herbert Kretzmer for Empty Chairs at Empty Tables lyrics © Warner/Chappell Music, Inc

There's a grief that can't be spoken,
There's a pain goes on and on.
Empty chairs at empty tables,
Now my friends are dead and gone.
Here they talked of revolution,
Here it was they lit the flame,
Here they sang about tomorrow and tomorrow never came.
From the table in the corner,
They could see a world reborn,
And they rose with voices ringing,
And I can hear them now
The very words that they have sung
Became their last communion
On this lonely barricade, at dawn.
Oh my friends, my friends forgive me
That I live and you are gone
There's a grief that can't be spoken,
And there's a pain goes on and on
Phantom faces at the window,
Phantom shadows on the floor,
Empty chairs at empty tables where my friends will meet no more.
Oh my friends, my friends don't ask me
What your sacrifice was for
Empty chairs at empty tables
Where my friend will sing no more.

Original Words From Songwriters: Alain Albert Boublil / Claude Michel Schonberg / Herbert Kretzmer
Empty Chairs at Empty Tables lyrics © Warner/Chappell Music, Inc